




3-2013

Journey of a Peace Journalist

Robert Koehler
DePaul University

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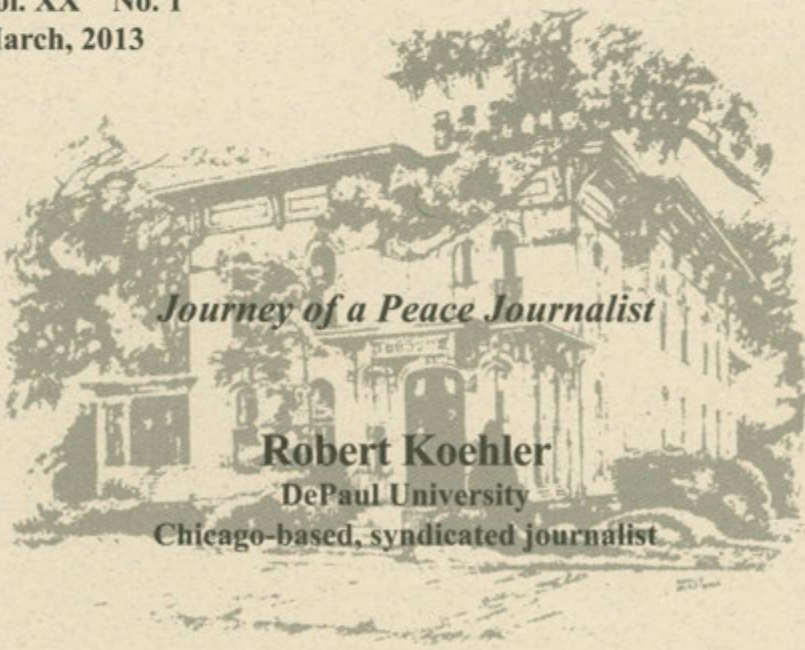
Koehler, Robert, "Journey of a Peace Journalist" (2013). *Center for the Study of Ethics in Society Papers*. Paper 94.
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Center for the Study of Ethics in Society

Papers published by the Center
Vol. XX No. 1
March, 2013



Journey of a Peace Journalist

Robert Koehler
DePaul University
Chicago-based, syndicated journalist

Center for the Study of Ethics in Society

Founded 1985

**Western Michigan University
3024 Moore Hall
1903 West Michigan Avenue
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Fax: 269-387-4389

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Journey of a Peace Journalist

**Presented October 15, 2012
2012 Winnie Veenstra Peace Lecture**

Robert Koehler

Papers presented for the
Center for the Study of Ethics in Society
Western Michigan University

Vol. XX No. 1
March, 2013

Robert Koehler

Robert Koehler is a career journalist: reporter, editor, columnist, and author. He is also a writing teacher at DePaul University, where he teaches a course called Peace Journalism. Koehler worked for 14 years as an editor at the *Chicago Tribune* syndicate, Tribune Media Services. His book, *Courage Grows Strong at the Wound*, was published by Xenos Press in 2010.

Koehler grew up in Dearborn, Michigan and graduated from Western Michigan University in 1971. He received an MFA in fiction writing from Columbia College in 1995. He has won awards for his writing from a number of organizations, including the National Newspaper Association, Suburban Newspapers of America, and the Chicago Headline Club. Many of Koehler's columns, along with information about his book, are available at his website:

<http://www.commonwonders.com>.

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Journey of a Peace Journalist

Robert Koehler

Before I can talk about peace journalism I need to talk about peace, which is mostly apparent in its absence. Peace is, you know, nothing much—or so the conventional thinking goes—until, whoops, conflict, anger, fighting flare up and peace is gone. But peace in a deep and profound sense—peace that is more than just a tense lull between violent confrontations—isn't really present at all if violence can be triggered by simple conflict, if a minor disagreement can whip us into a sort of emotional insanity, into road rage, without warning.

So ... I have a story from my boyhood. I grew up about 120 miles east of here, in Dearborn, Michigan. And in 1950s Dearborn when kids fought, something special happened, something magical almost—a force field, you might say, was summoned by the rage and tears and shouting. I've told this story in different places over the years, and every now and then someone tells me the same thing happened where they grew up. I don't know if it happened in Kalamazoo, but maybe some of you will recognize this sequence of events.

Two boys—it was pretty much always boys then—would go at it. On the playground, in the front yard, in the alley, in the park. Often it sprang up in the midst of a game. Then, wham, pushing, shoving, one kid is on the ground, the other is on top of him. And everybody else gathers around because this is irresistible, and there's usually no impulse among the onlookers to break it up. What happened, back in my childhood, and maybe something similar still occurs, is that the crowd of onlookers would start a special little chant. And it was always the same. "A fight, a fight," they'd cry, "between ..." —and then suddenly it got shockingly ugly, in my all-white community, as innocent children in some unknown way chose sides. And what they said was, I won't even repeat it verbatim, but they threw in the n-word, that terrible stain of a word spilling out of our past, "A fight, a fight, between an n-word and a white. Come on," and whoever they chose as the designated loser, let's say they chose Bobby ... they'd cry, sarcastically, "Come on, Bobby, beat that white."

That meant ... get it? Bobby was the n-word.

It's still awful to remember and talk about. A fight over marbles or baseball, not about race at all—there were no black kids in the Dearborn of my boyhood—could summon the entire force field of American racism, could channel the prevailing energy of hatred, of pre-Civil Rights movement, unprocessed

American racism, and bestow it as an anti-blessing on the combatants.

Nothing occurs in isolation—we're connected in complex, unplumbed ways. Think of it. The American hate pathology of the '50s had a presence that simply came to life, that showed up out of nowhere, wherever there was aggressive conflict. It was part of our hidden cohesion, even that of children, that we have a common enemy, a common scapegoat.

And the politics of war—the politics of hatred and fear, channeled toward a designated enemy, the one that's "it"—unites a nation with the same playground energy.

I was as much a part of all this as anyone. I got into fights and I certainly was an onlooker to fights, and chanted the chant and helped summon Mars, or Mars's little helper, to the scene... but one afternoon my thought process was permanently altered as I walked home from school. I was 11 years old, and I'd just been in a fight. My knuckles were bruised, I may have had a rip in my trousers, a gravel burn on my knee, big wet tears in my eyes. What I still remember vividly, more than 50 years later—having no memory whatsoever of the fight itself, or what it may have been about—is being overwhelmed by the illogic of what had just occurred, the absolute and utter futility of pounding on another kid and surrendering to a state of fury.

I vowed I was not going to do this again. It was more than a vow; it was a personal paradigm shift, preverbal, life-shaking, non-negotiable. For a long time I kept this vow to myself. I was unnerved by it.

But I tell this story because the title of my talk is “Journey of a Peace Journalist.” And this is where the journey began. There’s also another reason why I begin with a personal story—it’s because peace has an inner dimension, a personal voice, without which I don’t think peace is possible. If we can’t feel grief and love as we write, how can we write about peace? Too often we write about peace solely in a state of anger.

Just as we all carry hatred and a belief in a common enemy within us, we all carry the opposite as well, a belief in human unity. But if the hatred comes out first, the peace stays hidden, unexpressed, unmanifest.

Peace is first of all subjective and personal, but we live in a world that glorifies objectivity, or pseudo-objectivity. Quantum physicists understand that there’s no such thing as objectivity, but much of the mainstream media doesn’t, and this is the source, to my mind, of much our troubles.

Here, for instance, is an observation made by the media watchdog publication *Extra*: Mainstream reporters often say they can’t raise an issue unless it is first raised by a politician or official. As *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius explained

in April 2004, regarding the astonishing lack of a media debate in the lead-up to the Iraq war:

“In a sense, the media were victims of their own professionalism. Because there was little criticism of the war from prominent Democrats and foreign policy analysts, journalistic rules meant we shouldn’t create a debate on our own.”

What a stunning admission of career-track collusion what an abdication of the Fourth Estate. But this is what happens to a profession that loses sight of its mission. Suddenly it starts obeying lesser rules—rules that should more accurately be called compromises with power.

The *raison d’être* of journalism is to speak truth to power, not to kowtow to power so thoroughly you can’t raise questions that the powerful and prominent aren’t asking.

But as a peace journalist, I feel my challenge goes deeper. Even under indisputably justifiable conditions for war—and most people still feel World War II presented such conditions, or for that matter the invasion of Afghanistan in the wake of 9/11—I would feel an obligation to challenge conventional thinking, to ponder the possible consequences of what’s being proposed, to stay open to alternatives, to resist scapegoating and the easy slide into an “us vs. them” mentality.

There is no such thing as a nice war, a kind, humane, good-guy war. War, as I say, summons that playground

energy—racism, dehumanization, cruel indifference to human connectedness—no matter how just its cause.

“I joined the Army on my 18th birthday. When I joined I was told racism was gone from the military,” Mike Prysner said during the 2008 Winter Soldier hearings. “After 9/11, I (began hearing) towel head, camel jockey, sand nigger. These came from up the chain of command. The new word was hadji. A hadji is someone who takes a pilgrimage to Mecca. We took the best thing from Islam and made it the worst thing.” Prysner was part of a panel called “Racism and War: the Dehumanization of the Enemy.”

As I wrote in my column this week, I was haunted by the statistic that U.S. military veterans are committing suicide at the rate of 18 per day and by the fact that the term for the condition of many, maybe most, veterans and soldiers after their deployments in Afghanistan and Iraq is “moral injury.”

PTSD is a clinical term, turning a damaged vet into a mental patient. As Tyler Boudreau put it, the term “moral injury” transforms them back into citizens—citizens whose lives have been seriously damaged not just by physical and psychological injury but by something else as well. In service to their country, they were asked to transgress a fundamental spiritual threshold and sever the connection that unites us. We can’t dehumanize

others without doing the same to ourselves, and waking up to the fact that we have done this is sometimes unbearable.

DEHUMANIZATION ...

Here is one version of a military drill chant called "Sniper Wonderland":

"See the little girl with the puppy;
Lock and load a hollow-pointed round.
Take the shot and maybe if you're lucky
You'll watch their lifeless bodies hit the ground."

I am certain that our whole society is injured by this. It's not just isolated, individual vets. We're all suffering from moral injury. We have bought the idea that our security requires protection by a cult of armed hatred, but it's no longer tenable. Glory and fear no longer succeed at hiding the truth. The moral injury manifests not just in the suffering of veterans but in the consequences of misplaced social priorities. The more armed we become, the less safe anyone is. We're building an armed, unequal, prison-saturated country at perpetual war with the world and itself.

Yet I remain optimistic!

We're also building peace—real peace. Awareness that peace is possible and a passionate desire for peace are both growing in this country and around the world.

And peace journalism is the mechanism for spreading the word.

This is a wide open term: peace journalism. It has no set definition. It's very much a work in progress. I would say that, first of all, it comes from a place—a vision—of healing and connectedness. It embraces the concept of *power with* our fellow human beings, not power over them. Its aim is not to entertain—not chiefly to entertain, and certainly not to entertain by depicting someone as the designated loser in a conflict—but to empower the reader, to convey complexity. Peace journalism wants no part of the spectator culture. It believes every last one of us is a full-fledged participant in creating this world.

Too much journalism comes from a place of cynicism, spurred by a desperate commercialism. This is especially true today, as the great print media empires of the 20th century struggle to stay afloat in the 21st, reinvent themselves, and regain mass appeal, which is most easily served by us-vs.-them news, stories with winners and losers, stories that feature the scapegoat du jour. In such stories, the reader gets to be a sort of spectator winner: “Ooh, we beat ’em!” I regard this kind of journalism as the dying gasp of domination culture.

Peace journalism doesn't merely report all sides of a conflict. It sees conflict as structural in nature, with all of us participating in its creation and its resolution. As peace journalism pioneer Jake Lynch put it: “The structure and culture of a conflict are shared—and contributed to—by all the parties.

Because ‘blame’ cannot therefore be pinned on one demonized party, suddenly it makes sense to balance and neutralize those factors if the conflict is to be transformed into a nonviolent phase—not something you can do with more violence.”

Here’s another way to say much the same thing. My seatmate last year on an international flight said to me, out of the blue, quoting from an unknown source: “You’re as close to God as you are to the person you like the least.”

No matter how hard we work for external peace, we have to keep making this internal journey as well.

It is through conflict that we grow in our understanding of one another. In the early 20th century, Mary Parker-Follett, a visionary business-management consultant, wrote an essay called “Constructive Conflict.” She explained that there are three primary ways of dealing with conflict. One is domination, a process that leaves a winner and a loser. The second, also very familiar, is compromise; everyone gives in, no one gets what they want. The third is what she called integration, or transformation, where both sides acknowledge what they need and create a new structure that satisfies everyone.

Since conflict is inevitable, maybe, she suggests, we should figure out how to use it intelligently. “All polishing is done by friction,” she wrote. Friction, of course, equals conflict. “The music of the violin we get by friction.”

Becoming a peace journalist begins with a spark of belief in all this, but the cynicism of the profession—the profession’s surrender of its independence to “the rules” that dictate you only report what those in power want you to report—can slowly snuff out that spark.

I would say I was rescued from my own cynicism as a career journalist when I started dating the woman who would become my wife. She was a public interest lawyer and she reawakened the 11-year-old boy in me, and the 19-year-old kid marching for civil rights and saying no to the Vietnam War. Barbara had not lost her ’60s idealism. One powerful memory I have is just the questions she asked, innocent and nonjudgmental: Why am I writing about this and not that? Slowly I found myself being coaxed away from my own and my paper’s version of “the rules” of what constituted an appropriate story and what didn’t. I started breaking the rules.

Love and peace journalism flowered in me as a single entity. I was in the middle of my profession at that point, but, wow, I began seeing new possibilities for what I could do with it. It was the early ’80s—I began writing about all the Central American refugees in Chicago, refugees from El Salvador, Guatemala, refugees of the wars we were waging by proxy in those countries.

I discovered the connection between journalism and community. What a joy it became to listen to people, to hear their stories. It was also at this point that I seized hold of the venue of the weekly column as a way to put my voice and heart back into my words. I would have to say that when I rediscovered my voice I rediscovered my conscience.

At this point I've written a weekly column for some 25 years. That remains my primary outlet as a peace journalist. The current column I write, which is syndicated by the *Chicago Tribune*, began in 1999. I was then an editor at the Tribune syndicate, Tribune Media Services. I describe the columns as prayers disguised as op-eds.

I began writing my current column about a year after I lost my wife to cancer. While I take on the whole world with the column—certainly since 9/11 I've been covering the war on terror, writing about shock and awe bombing and depleted uranium contamination, torture, and occupation—initially the column went inward.

Media that obeys the rules, à la David Ignatius—media unable to summon its conscience—covers war as an abstraction. For instance, when eight women and girls were killed and another eight injured last month in a NATO bombing in Afghanistan, the headline in the *New York Times* read: "Karzai Denounces Coalition Over Airstrikes." The focus of the story was

the geopolitical chess game. The killing of the Afghan women was sad and regrettable and beside the point.

The Times story concluded: "Coalition forces were apparently unaware that village women sometimes go into the woods in the early hours of the morning to fetch wood for cooking fires they need to have going by breakfast time." So, yeah ... we were just innocently bombing the woods at 4 a.m. and had no idea there were women and girls in the woods. We didn't mean any harm!

The innocence suggested in the Times story comes from its coverage of U.S. foreign policy, not human lives. This is insane. As a peace journalist, I feel like the number one story every day is the value of human life—or life itself, all life.

In the context of violence, fear and hatred, peace is, as I said at the beginning of this talk, nothing much—barely noticeable until it's gone. But in the context of life, peace is what vibrates with potential. Peace is everything.

And knowing this is the core, the soul, of peace journalism.

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Western Michigan University
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1903 W. Michigan Ave.
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